



# The French Environmental Movement in the Era of Climate Change: The Case of Notre Dame des Landes

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Green Politics section, Panel on **The National Politics of Climate Change**

Chair: **Chris Rootes**

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### **The French Environmental Movement in the Era of Climate Change**

#### **The Case of Notre Dame des Landes**

These are heady times for the environmental movement in France. In the 2009 European elections, Greens gained as many seats as socialist (fourteen), with over 2.8 million votes (16.28%); in the spring 2010 elections for France's regional councils, the Greens and their allies maintained this strong performance, gaining 12.18% of the vote on the first round, 263 councillors (up from 159 in 2004), and subsequently entering into alliances with Socialists in the executives of twenty-one of Metropolitan France's twenty-two regional councils. The dissolution of Les Verts into a new permanent formation, Europe Ecologie, in November 2010, was completed in a position of strength rather than – as has been the case for organisational dispute throughout most of the party's history – one of electoral weakness. Meanwhile, Greenpeace France's membership has stabilised around the 120,000 mark (an extraordinary rise from near organisational collapse in the late 1990s), and a series of environmental organisations have been recognised by the state and included in policy discussion networks in President Sarkozy's 2007 Grenelle de l'environnement. The Grenelle, indeed, also testified to the mainstreaming of environmental thematics across policy-making in France, and to a new and unexpected seriousness with which the government is now apparently addressing climate change and sustainable development.

In the era of climate change, therefore, the French Green movement appears as strong as it has ever done, particularly in the predominantly institutionalised terms of the movement's recent development. But what of the extra institutional movement, and of the prevalence of environmental protest? On the ground, the success of the Faucheurs volontaires has demonstrated the ability of environmental social movements to mobilise comparatively large numbers of activists on a national basis, form alliances across movement sectors, and produce substantive policy change, with Sarkozy's government bowing to pressure in January 2008 and effectively banning the commercial cultivation of Monsanto GM corn in France. Meanwhile, the widespread urban protest against mobile phone masts and the mobilisations in Brittany over clean sea and river water continue to demonstrate the potency of local environmental

movements. Yet on climate change – the defining environmental problematic of our age – there is rather less to report, save for the organisation in the summers of 2009 and 2010 of the first French climate camps, both in the French north/west.

Our paper proposes to evaluate the effect of climate change as an issue on the development of the extra institutional environment movement in France. Here, we seek to evaluate to what extent environmental movement politics – organised, collective, citizen constituted challenges to state policy preferences, or, even more simply perhaps, environmental politics from below – has integrated the climate change problematic into its mobilising structures. Given that environmental movements in France have historically and typically mobilised in the face of public infrastructural projects, our discussion of how climate change has affected national environmental politics centres on movement responses (mobilisation, discourses, policy, strategies) to a major infrastructure projects where climate change is a potential effective mobilising frame, situated in an area which historically has high levels of environmental activism, and where electoral results for environmental formations have been particularly strong, and which played a central role in the development of an environmental consciousness in France, and even Europe (Kernalegenn 2006, pp.13-15). Since the 1989 municipal elections, the Greens have enjoyed a significant and stable series of electoral results in Brittany; the principal Breton cities have a green electorate in seemingly constant progression, with strong results at municipal and regional elections (especially in 2010).

The case study we focus on is the proposal to construct a new two-runway airport at Notre Dame des Landes, between Nantes and Rennes in southern Brittany (though since 1982 administratively within the Pays de la Loire region). According to John Stewart, chair of HACAN Clear Skies and one of the leaders of the (successful) opposition to the construction of a third runway at London Heathrow airport, Notre Dame des Landes is ‘one of the biggest battles against an airport taking place in Europe at this point in time’.<sup>1</sup> Our aim is to explain why – perhaps eyebrow-raisingly in international comparative context – climate change has remained a relatively minor, background issue in this conflict. The thesis we develop is that, beyond the national emissions data and the peculiarities of the specific case, a series of institutional and identitarian movement dynamics constrains the French environmental movement’s ability to mobilise effectively on climate change. We therefore outline the project and the opposition to it, and explain the role of climate change in the opposition movement. We then go on to highlight a number of reasons why climate change has been unable to emerge as a unifying force in opposition to the project, putting forward arguments that relate to both the *changing* nature of institutional arrangements in France and to the importance of a (much more *stable*) specific oppositional movement

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<sup>1</sup> Speech, annual meeting against Notre Dame des Landes, 10 July 2011.

tradition. Finally, we discuss in more general terms why climate change is a weak mobilisational frame in France, and discuss also what these two projects mean for France's relatively bold climate change agenda, as set out by President Sarkozy in the Grenelle de l'environnement.

### **I. Notre Dame des Landes : *un aéroport Grenello-compatible* ?**

In December 2010, Aéroports du Grand Ouest – the official name of the airport, and 85% owned by French transnational concession and construction conglomerate Vinci – signed a contract with the French state to operate a new international airport at Notre Dame des Landes, some 17 kilometres north-west of Nantes, France's eighth largest city, with a population of around 600,000 inhabitants (and 80km south of Rennes, France's 20<sup>th</sup> largest city, with a population of about 300,000 inhabitants). Under the terms of the contract, a public-private partnership, Vinci will gain a 55-year concession lease as airport operator in order to recoup its investment in the project's construction, which will be carried out by Vinci Construction France and Eurovia, a subsidiary of Vinci. The total cost of construction – including both airport and road access – is estimated at 565M€, of which the central state will pay 125.5M€, subnational authorities a combined 115.5M€, and Aéroports du Grand Ouest the remaining 315M€.<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, expropriation procedures are underway for tenants and inhabitants, including the negotiation of an acceptable price for the (agricultural) land with landowners. Soil sampling and environmental assessments have been underway since early 2009. Construction of new road access infrastructures is due to begin next year; construction of the airport itself is scheduled to start in 2014. If construction proceeds as envisaged, the airport will open to commercial traffic in 2017; high-speed rail (TGV) connections to Rennes and Nantes are planned for 2025.

Nantes, of course, already has an international airport: Nantes Atlantique, south of the river Loire, opened in 1951 as a conversion from a military airfield then known as Château Bougon, also the site of an Airbus factory and, under the terms of the AGO contract, also operated by Vinci from 1 January 2011 (taking over from the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de Nantes). Passenger traffic at Nantes Atlantique rose sharply in the late 1990s to just under 1.9 million passengers per year (CNDP 2002, p.10), and has since risen steadily, to just over 3 million in 2010 (Union des Aéroports Français 2011, p.7). The presence of a single runway is considered a brake on expansion, with technical capacity restricted to between 4.5 and 5 million passengers a year, though the size of the terminal effectively restricts this further, to around the current level of 3 million (CNDP 2002, pp.15-17). The new two-runway airport at

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<sup>2</sup> *La Lettre d'information du Syndicat mixte d'études de l'aéroport de Notre-Dame-des-Landes*, 10, July 2011, p.3. Of the slice financed by subnational authorities, 35% and 25% are accounted for by the Pays de la Loire and Brittany regional councils respectively, 20% by the Loire Atlantique departmental council, and 15.5% by the Nantes metropolitan authority.

Notre Dame des Landes is designed to handle four million passengers per year, and eventually 9 million, or about the same size as Nice, France's third busiest airport. The relocation of the airport thus aims to enable the expansion of passenger numbers whilst avoiding low level flying over populated urban areas.

Moreover, the airport will form part of a 'balanced regional development plan' for this part of western France, aimed at reconciling the economic development of the region – identified as one of the six fastest growing French regions of international stature – and environmental preservation. Notre Dames des Landes, in other words, is conceived as a sustainable development showcase. To this effect, the airport terminal will be constructed to leading French environmental standards (Haute qualité environnementale, HQE) and will operate to BBC (low energy consumption) norms. The airport will be the first energy positive airport in France, producing more than it consumes, through the use of photovoltaic cells; its runways and the location of its terminal will 'optimise flight and taxiing time, thereby generating fuel savings' (Vinci 2011, p.57; Syndicat mixte d'études de l'aéroport de Notre Dames des Landes, 2010, pp.4-6).<sup>3</sup> Further, details of the AGO contract show undertakings by Vinci to promote local agriculture by forming an AMAP (Association pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne), creating allotments for local inhabitants and airport employees, providing organic food in the terminal, and installing a demonstration farm which could provide jobs for local farmers who will lose their land as a result of the airport construction (Vinci 2010, pp.25-8). The necessary environmental impacts of the airport's construction will be set off by a series of conservation and remediation measures, such as the establishment of an environmental observatory and the restoration of 100ha of bocage (hedgerow farmland) (Syndicat mixte d'études de l'aéroport de Notre Dames des Landes, 2010, p.6).

For the local political promoters of the project, the new airport represents a 'controlled, rational, sustainable development, a balanced model of growth underpinned by our values of solidarity',<sup>4</sup> and is consistent with Nantes' selection by the European Commission as European Green Capital in 2013. Moreover, as this is technically a relocation of an existing airport rather than an additional one, Notre Dame des Landes is also, according to its promoters, consistent with the dispositions of the Grenelle. At local and national level, the project is notably backed by both the Parti socialiste and the Gaullist UMP; the financial contributions of the various local authorities involved received clear support in each of the respective formal votes in autumn 2010: 91 in favour out of 112 for Nantes Métropole; 49 out of 59 for

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<sup>3</sup> This is in line with the conglomerate's overarching commitment to sustainable development practices across its business model (Vinci 2011, pp.18-25), Vinci's environmental strategy formally combines 'preserving natural resources by understanding and limiting environmental impacts, preventing pollution and preserving biodiversity and nature for future generations', 'fighting climate change by systematically adopting an eco-design approach that takes into account the full life cycle of products and services', and 'designing and proposing a green offer' (p.138).

<sup>4</sup> 'Déménager l'aéroport de Nantes : "un choix raisonné et responsable"', *Le Monde*, 15 February 2011.

the Loire Atlantique departmental council; 42 out of 74 for the Pays de la Loire regional council, and 47 out of 83 for the Bretagne regional council.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The Opposition to the Project

Notre Dame des Landes thus has strong institutional and mainstream political support. However, there is clearly stronger opposition in the two regional assemblies, where there is strong environmental and to a lesser extent, centrist representation, than in the metropolitan and departmental councils, which are dominated by the PS and UMP. Opposition on the ground is principally led by agricultural organisations, environmental activists, de-growth groups, and an anarchist community of about 150 people, currently squatting the airport site.

Opposition towards the construction of an airport at Notre Dame des Landes dates back to the late 1960s, when the site was initially earmarked as a transatlantic platform for Concorde, and subsequently as a freight facility, before it was mothballed as a result of the 1970s oil crisis. In 1972, a group of farmers directly concerned by the project formed the ADECA (Association de défense des exploitants concernés par l'aéroport); opposition was particularly focused around the *Paysan-Travailleur* movement led by Bernard Lambert, a peasant farmer activist from the Loire-Atlantique department. Following the relaunch of the project in the 1990s and, formally, from 2000 – when the Jospin government sought the construction of a third Paris airport – opposition has been principally led by the ACIPA (Association citoyenne intercommunale des populations concernées par le projet d'aéroport de Notre-Dame-des-Landes), specifically seeking to widen the oppositional base beyond the local agricultural community. The ACIPA currently claims 3360 members; in 2005, it established a coordinating structure (Coordination des associations opposées au projet d'aéroport de Notre Dame des Landes) which now brings together 34 organisations, including Greenpeace, WWF, Robin des bois, ATTAC, Confédération paysanne, NPA, MODEM, and Les Verts.

Over the last decade, ACIPA (and subsequently the Coordination) has concentrated on disseminating information, building solidarity, organising actions, and fighting the project according to the rhythms of the various institutional opportunities: presenting dossiers to and participating in the 2002-3 CNDP hearings, the 2007 public enquiry, and the 2007 regional hearings of the Grenelle de l'environnement; attempting to place the airport at the centre of local election campaigns; countering the claims of the project promoters (especially concerning the level of 'saturation' of Nantes Atlantique) and developing alternative solutions (improving train and tram access to Nantes Atlantique, and reorienting the existing

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<sup>5</sup> ACIPA, *Bulletin d'information aux adhérents*, 31, January-February 2011, p.2.

runway to reduce the effects of noise pollution); and initiating legal challenges (against the February 2008 declaration of public utility) and providing legal support (for inhabitants subject to expropriation procedures). Alongside the semaine de résistance organised by the ACIPA in August 2009, Notre Dame des Landes became the site of the first Climate Camp held in France; an appeal made at the Camp (and funds raised) led to an increase in the occupation of the airport zone (established by the Coordination in 2007) and the founding of an autonomous anarchist community. This anarchist community has established its own collective farm on the airport site (Le Sabot), and has conducted a guerrilla campaign of harassment and sabotage against state officials and environmental assessment companies carrying out geological and biodiversity studies on the future site.<sup>6</sup> Mobilisations against the airport have correspondingly been characterised by muscular policing and tense stand-offs between protesters and gendarmes, particularly at the time of the public enquiry in November-December 2010 over the reorganisation of the land. Two activists, arrested for the theft and destruction of soil samples a state geological survey (and subsequent refusal to provide a DNA sample), were sentenced to four months in prison (suspended) at Saint-Nazaire in April 2009, reduced on appeal in March 2011 to fines of 800€ each.

### III. Adversarial Framing

For opponents of the project such as Les Amis de la Terre, the French Friends of the Earth, the green light for the proposed airport is a 'scandale écologique et économique',<sup>7</sup> and is 'probably one of the most symbolic projects of the renouncement of the Grenelle de l'environnement'.<sup>8</sup> In fact, as *Marianne* puts it, the arguments against the airport have scarcely changed over the last forty years: Nantes already has an airport that is far from saturation; construction of the airport and associated infrastructure will take the place of about 2000ha of agricultural (principally, dairy) land, and around 80 farms; the cost (551) will be financed by public money (half), for few tangible collective benefits.<sup>9</sup> For the Coordination, 'Le projet est nuisible non seulement écologiquement mais aussi humainement et économiquement'. The economic consequences include the threat to jobs south of the Loire, the potential closure of Rennes airport, the drain on local authority finances, and the destruction of dairy production on the airport site; in energy terms, the likely increases in fuel consumption and GHG emissions; and in environmental terms, the destruction of one of the department's last remaining areas of exceptional biodiversity, the

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<sup>6</sup> 'Il s'est passé plein de choses...', *Lèse Béton*, 3, July 2011, p.5 ; see also <http://zad.nadir.org>

<sup>7</sup> 'Rassemblement à Notre Dame des Landes (44)', <http://www.amisdelaterre.org/Rassemblement-a-Notre-Dame-des.html>, 8 July 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Sylvain Angerand, 'Notre Dame des Landes : Vinci peut toujours peindre son aéroport en vert, nous n'en voulons pas !', <http://www.amisdelaterre.org/Notre-Dame-des-Landes-Vinci-peut.html>, 15 February 2011.

<sup>9</sup> 'Aéroport de Nantes : l'union de la gauche se construit ... sans le PS', *Marianne*, 7 July 2011.

acceleration of urbanisation to the north of Nantes, and, again, the loss of significant agricultural land.<sup>10</sup>

The arguments put forward by opponents are to some extent therefore concerned with climate change; as noted above, Notre Dame des Landes was the site of France's first Climate Camp, after all. However, when compared to the mobilisation against the third runway at Heathrow, the actions of Plane Stupid, or the recent trials of activists in the UK for actions against the Kingsnorth, Drax, and Ratcliffe power stations, where climate change has been the central mobilising interpretive frame for opposition, Notre Dame des Landes appears striking for the relative lack of importance of climate change in oppositional discourses. For example, though, indeed, there was one workshop devoted to energy and climate at the July 2011 rally against the airport at Vigneux de Bretagne (widely seen as being highly successful,<sup>11</sup> drawing some 15,000 people over the three days), climate remained a minor theme; on the Sunday afternoon, when the principal groups opposed to the airport successively took the stage for brief speeches, climate change wasn't mentioned once; the literature produced by the squatters occupying part of the airport site does not mention climate change; at the trials (at Nantes in 2009 and, on appeal, Rennes in 2010) of two activists for the theft of soil samples taken from the site, climate change was again absent as a justifying or contextualising motive put forward by the defence, despite the option of a necessity defence and the calling of expert witnesses; in the joint tribune signed by 34 associations which appeared in *Le Monde* setting out the reasons for their opposition to the new airport, neither climate change nor any theme related to climate change (such as atmospheric pollution) was advanced.

For the Coordination,

Devant un projet si absurde et et même indécent aujourd'hui, tant en termes de gaspillage de terres et d'argent public que d'aggravation des problèmes existants (disparition de 50 exploitations agricoles, étalement urbain, déséquilibre du territoire...), la volonté de garder les terres de Notre-Dame-des-Landes pour l'agriculture bocagère est puissante.<sup>12</sup>

Avec le projet de Notre-Dame-des-Landes, on nous fait miroiter l'espoir d'un essor économique et la création d'emplois alors qu'il ne s'agira sans doute que de transferts d'emplois existants. Ce qui est sûr actuellement c'est qu'en détruisant une cinquantaine d'exploitations agricoles sur le site de Notre-Dame-des-Landes, on va aussi détruire plus de 600 emplois qui leurs sont liés. La

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<sup>10</sup> Coordination des associations opposées au projet d'aéroport de Notre Dame des Landes, 'Inauguration d'un lieu de résistance à Notre Dame des Landes (44)', Dossier de presse, 22 November 2007, p.3; <http://solidarites.ecologie.free.fr/dossier%20de%20presse%208%20dec%2007.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> For *Ouest France*, 'Le succès de la mobilisation est incontestable' ; see 'Aéroport : l'opposition à la vitesse supérieure', 11 July 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Geneviève Leboutoux, 'Des tritons pas des avions !', *Silence*, 369, June 2009, p.6.



France perd l'équivalent d'un département de terres agricoles – terres nourricières – tous les dix ans. Est-il opportun d'en détruire plus de 2 000 hectares pour l'implantation de ce projet coûteux et parfaitement inutile qui va aussi dévaster l'environnement et la bio-diversité de cette zone bocagère?<sup>13</sup>

For Françoise Verchère, the lead spokesperson of the Cédpa collective which brings together local elected representatives, Notre Dame des Landes

est l'image même d'un mode de développement que nous refusons. Nous ne sommes pas contre la circulation des biens et des personnes, nous ne sommes évidemment pas contre l'emploi, mais nous sommes contre un transfert destructeur et inutile, fondé sur l'idée d'une croissance infinie, nous sommes contre le gaspillage d'argent public, nous sommes contre le partenariat avec des groupes financiers qui ne cherchent que leur profit.<sup>14</sup>

For the NPA,

Les opposants à l'aéroport sont d'abord les agriculteurs qui refusent de perdre leurs outils de travail. Ce sont ensuite les habitants, dont l'environnement immédiat va être massacré, et les associations et partis politiques qui se battent pour un autre choix de société. Car ce projet est emblématique du capitalisme qui exploite et dévore les territoires contre l'assentiment de populations bafouées.<sup>15</sup>

To some extent, these different positions reflect the heteroclitic nature of the opposition groups mobilising against Notre Dames des lands; it is hardly surprising that the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste frames the airport as primarily a question of capitalism, or the anarchist squatters as a question of social organisation. Yet all groups centre on the defence of land as a common mobilising and federating frame; climate change is absent from many of the analyses put forward, and secondary for even environmental associations.

We are therefore faced with something of an empirical puzzle. According to European Environment Agency data, emissions from transport account for 21 per cent of total GHG emissions in the EU-15 member states (and 25.8 per cent in France, see EEA 2009, p.134); whilst road transport is the largest

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<sup>13</sup> 'Aéroport de Nantes : "Exploisons ce qui existe déjà !" ', *Le Monde*, 1 March 2011.

<sup>14</sup> In ACIPA, *Bulletin d'information aux adhérents*, 29, May-June 2010, p.3

<sup>15</sup> 'La lutte contre l'Ayraultport de Vinci est internationale !', <http://www.npa2009.org/content/la-lutte-contre-layraultport-de-vinci-est-internationale>, 12 July 2011.

contributor (93 per cent in 2008), road transport and air transport were the fastest growing contributors to transport GHG emissions between 1990 and 2008, whilst domestic aviation was the fastest growing transport mode (EEA 2011).<sup>16</sup> It might therefore be reasonable to expect that the construction of a new airport, designed to enable expansion in passenger movements, and to promote greater transport mobility for key areas of GHG emissions, would place climate change at the centre of both the national policy agenda and provide a key mobilising frame for opponents.

In the Notre Dame des Landes conflict, however, climate change is striking by (if not its absence) its relative lack of importance as a mobilising frame; rather, the slogan articulated by the project's opponents of 'sauver la terre' – save the earth,<sup>17</sup> an obvious play on words – refers primarily to the defence of localised agricultural land use; environmental objectives are also most clearly signalled in localised terms, as issues relating to the specific land under threat, through the defence of biodiversity. Moreover, though the conflict has a national profile (*Le Monde* has, for instance, recently carried a series of tribunes for and against the project), this has, like climate change framing, remained relatively minor. Despite the presence of international links– John Stewart of HACAN is a regular contact, and both he and Evgenia Tchrikova, a Russian activist campaigning against Vinci's construction of the Moscow-St Petersburg toll motorway through the Kimki forest, made well received speeches at the July 2011 rally – there has, so far, been no significant national or international demonstration against Notre Dame des Landes. Indeed, it was (almost incredibly) only in February of this year that a national coordinating structure for the campaign was established.

We are therefore faced with a double oddity. Why has climate change remained below the surface, despite the ostensible explicit causal relationship with the production of GHGs? And why has the national dimension of the conflict remained similarly unimportant? Though it is notoriously difficult to explain an absence rather than a presence, we attempt in the following discussion to put forward three reasons why this should be so.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/indicators/transport-emissions-of-greenhouse-gases/transport-emissions-of-greenhouse-gases-7>, accessed 20 August 2011. GHG emissions from international aviation are not currently included in Kyoto targets.

<sup>17</sup> See for example: Coordination des associations opposées au projet d'aéroport de Notre Dame des Landes, 'Inauguration d'un lieu de résistance à Notre Dame des Landes (44)', Dossier de presse, 22 November 2007, p.2; <http://solidarites.ecologie.free.fr/dossier%20de%20presse%208%20dec%2007.pdf>

#### **IV. Institutional evolution: decentring the (central) state**

France has long been cast in the political process literature as the archetypal strong, centralised, unitary state. Despite the 1982 decentralisation reforms (and in particular the constitution of democratically elected regional councils in 1986) and the importance of European and other international institutions in key policy areas, in comparative terms France is generally classified in the terms used by political process analysis as a 'high capacity democracy' (Tilly & Tarrow 2007, p.57): a broadly centralized state with a strong executive, subordinate legislature, an imperfect separation of powers between political and judicial elites and institutions, an entrenched political culture of central state primacy, and little capacity for and fewer dispositions towards inclusive and/or participatory forms of democratic negotiation. France, in Kriesi *et al's* influential work, is a 'strong state with an exclusive dominant strategy' (Koopmans & Kriesi 1995, p.36); for Duyvendak, this political-institutional context 'invites movements to adopt disruptive, often violent strategies' (1995, p.63). The corollary of this lies in the distinctive French model of Republican citizenship as a 'vertical relationship between the citizen and the state, and not a series of lateral relationships between individuals or groups' (Jennings 2000, p.593), where 'citizens are supposed to express their opinion and act in accordance with a general will [...] embodied in and implemented by the State' (Duchesne 2005, p.231), and thus which 'legitimised an activist role for the state: in managing her economy, her society and culture, and centre-periphery relations' (Lovecy 2000, p.207). In France, as a consequence, there is a specific combination of low membership of collective civic organisations, but high political involvement, and where citizens switch with relative ease from conventional to disruptive political behaviour (Vassallo 2010).

France, therefore, has a distinctive political culture, characterised by a centralised state habituated to a top-down modus operandum that prioritises institutional goals over social negotiation, and the capacity for regular, mass, collective action, despite – even because of – the weakness of its intermediary civic organisations. This is of course an exaggerated image, but one that – for the environmental movement in particular – is capable of resuming with some accuracy the pattern of social struggle drawn from the 1971-81 campaign against the extension of a military base on the Larzac plateau (Holohan 1976, Alland & Alland 1994, Lebovics 2004) and the 1976-81 campaign against the construction of a nuclear power station at Plogoff on the west Breton coast (Borvon 2004, Kernalegenn 2006, Simon 2010a). Both campaigns opposed local cultural and economic practice (sheep farmers and Occitan regionalism on the Larzac plateau, fishermen and Breton separatism at Plogoff) with the demands of the central state and the general interest (national defence, energy independence). The campaigns developed strong bonds between them – with the opening of a sheepfold at Plogoff, and solidarity marches of activists in each direction – and a common ideological critique in which the central French state was seen as the prime antagonist in struggles over cultural and territorial autonomy; the fledgling environmental movement

was thus radicalised by a critique of societal choices implied by militarisation and nuclearisation in a system considered to be already excessively authoritarian and centralised (Hayes 2002: 32-5).

Clearly, this model still has some explanatory power in contemporary France, as the campaign this year against the licencing of prospecting for shale gas, of which France (along with Poland) enjoys by some distance the largest reserves in Europe (EIA 2011: p.4), demonstrates. In spring last year, the French energy and environment ministry issued six permits for shale oil and gas prospection in the Paris basin and southern France; the lease awards were highly competitive, and acquired by a series of European and American concerns, including Total and GDF-Suez. This process was undertaken, however, with neither public information or consultation; and given that one concession concerned the Larzac plateau, it subsequently aroused vociferous opposition. Ostensibly, therefore, the Plogoff, Larzac, and shale gas examples offer us an attractive vision of continuity: that of a determined and effective opposition to potential serious environmental harm, mobilising relatively large numbers of people rapidly and effectively against a centralised state apparatus seeking to impose bureaucratic solutions on peripheral communities. For *Le Monde*, indeed, the opposition to shale gas has come to symbolise the ecological movement in France today.<sup>18</sup>

Here we should pause, however. In the specific French case, McCauley (2008) has recently argued powerfully that the pace and progress of Europeanisation have fundamentally changed this paradigm, and that if we are to fully understand environmental mobilisations in France, we should abandon state-centric approaches for group-centric ones within a multi-level opportunity structure. As we have also argued with respect to the long-running French environmental mobilisations against Somport tunnel and the damming of the Loire in the 1990s, the inter-related dynamics of decentralisation, regionalisation, and Europeanisation have the capacity to fundamentally alter the growth paradigms underpinning capital development projects, and consequently the alliance structures available to social mobilisations against them (Hayes 2002). More widely, Rachel Schurman points out that in the contemporary era of neo-liberal globalization and increased corporate power, social movements are increasingly targeting non-state organisations, including transnational corporations and institutions. For Schurman, 'scholars of social movements need to follow the course taken by many contemporary movements and activist groups, and "decenter" the state' (2004, p.247).

The case of Notre Dame des Landes is, therefore, revealing. When the initial project was launched by the central state in May 1970, the local inhabitants reportedly learnt from a newspaper headline that

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<sup>18</sup> 'Que sait-on des gaz de schiste ?', *Le Monde*, 22 April 2011.

La métropole Nantes – Saint Nazaire pourrait devenir le Rotterdam aérien de l'Europe par la création d'un aéroport international de fret au nord de la Loire.

Local consultation meetings were not organised until two years later.<sup>19</sup> Today, however, the principal promoters of the project are not the central state, but the Nantes municipal council and, beyond, regional political elites (and in particular the socialist MP and mayor of Nantes, Jean Marc Ayrault). The project was specifically revived in the early 1990s by the financing of a pre-feasibility study financed by the Loire-Atlantique, Ille-et-Vilaine, and Maine-et-Loire departmental councils, the Pays de la Loire regional council and the greater Nantes metropolitan council, and written into the 2000-2006 state-region planning contract (CPER) under intense lobbying from the Pays de la Loire. Rather therefore than a project designed to satisfy centralised state imperatives, the revived airport plan enables to enhance regional economic and political status. These elites see the construction of Notre Dame des Landes as the key to dynamic neo-liberal regional competitiveness, capable of creating linkages between Rennes and Nantes within an economically powerful European pole, with improved transport links both within the region (through the much lobbied for upgrading of the TGV network between Le Mans/Rennes, Rennes/Brest and Rennes/Nantes) and between the region and the rest of Europe; 'air transport accessibility is a major factor in economic development', argued Jacques Auxiette, Jean-Marc Ayrault, Daniel Delaveau, Jean-Yves Le Drian, and Patrick Mareschal – all members of the Parti socialiste and, respectively, president of the Pays de la Loire regional council, mayor of Nantes, mayor of Rennes, president of the Brittany regional council, and president of the Loire-Atlantique departmental council – in a joint opinion piece published in *Le Monde*. Moreover, the Loire-Atlantique federation of Breton regionalist party the Union démocratique bretonne (UDB) also see it this way, arguing that the construction of Notre Dame des Landes will help counterbalance the excessive centralisation of the French economy, will reduce the need for short internal flights from the French west to the Paris airports of Orly and Roissy, and will enable stronger linkages between western Brittany, Rennes and Nantes. For the UDB,

Refuser un grand aéroport international en Bretagne, c'est persister dans un modèle centraliste bien dépassé, c'est s'enfermer dans le sous-développement économique, c'est faire la même erreur que les villes comme Alençon, qui ont refusé le chemin de fer il y a un siècle, et qui ont aujourd'hui disparu du monde économique.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 'Un aéroport, en vert et contre tout. Reportage sur 40 ans de lutte à Notre-Dame-des-Landes', Z, 4, Autumn 2010, p.8

<sup>20</sup> Alain Cedelle, 'Un aéroport pour le développement économique', [http://www.udb-bzh.net/archives/article.php3?id\\_article=131&lang=fr](http://www.udb-bzh.net/archives/article.php3?id_article=131&lang=fr), 15 January 2005.

## V. Memory and Tradition

A number of social movement analyses have recently begin to look at the importance of memory in the determination of mobilisation choices. PPT's proponents claim that a focus on recurring causal mechanisms and processes is able to explain the patterns, incidence and forms of contentious politics, even where movement ideas and actors are very different. Even so, PPT advocates eschew the search for positivist laws of social science, and define their position as also reflecting contingent contexts (Tilly & Tarrow 2007: xi). Indeed, by introducing a distinction between a movement *base* and *campaign*, Tilly and Tarrow seem to have implicitly accepted the necessity of culture to a fuller understanding of movement action:

*A social movement base* consists of movement organizations, networks, participants and the accumulated cultural artefacts, memories, and traditions that contribute to social movement campaigns.

*A social movement campaign* is a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of concerted public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment, using such means as public meetings, demonstrations, petitions, and press releases. (2007: 114)

Through the recognition of the base as, in part, the ongoing accumulation of 'cultural artefacts, memories, and traditions', Tilly and Tarrow thus implicitly make an accommodation with culturally-oriented approaches to movement analysis, such as the 'abeyance structures' which, in Taylor's (1989) argument, enable continuity between movement campaigns, or those propounded by Melucci. Arguing that (even where directly contesting the distribution of power in society) the primary work of social movements is the construction of collective identity and the mounting of challenges over the codification of meaning (1996: 358-9), Melucci distinguishes between *latent* and *visible* phases of social movement activity (1985: 800-1, 1989). In latent phases, movements may not be visible, but this does not mean that they are not active; campaigns are founded on networks continually at work in 'the daily production of alternative frameworks of meaning' (1989: 70), without which the subsequent visible phase of organisation could not develop. Indeed, the two phases are mutually reinforcing:

Latency allows visibility in that it feeds the former with solidarity resources and with a cultural framework for mobilization. Visibility reinforces submerged networks. It provides energies to renew solidarity, facilitates creation of new groups and recruitment of new militants attracted by public mobilization who then flow into the submerged network. (1985: 801)

In seeking an explanation for the visible forms of the Notre Dame des Landes campaign, we are therefore interested here in the relationship between the ‘cultural artefacts, memories, and traditions’ that characterise the ‘organizations, networks, participants’ that constitute the movement. In particular, the concept of memory, and specifically the concept of a collective activist memory tied to the re-enactment of previous foundational struggles, seems particularly important to us here. Gilles Simon, in a comprehensive and authoritative account of the successful campaign of the late 1970s/early 1980s against the siting of a nuclear power station at Plogoff on the west Breton coast, underlines how Plogoff continues to exert its effect on activism in Brittany today, constituting an ‘ensemble mémoriel’. This collective memory operates both symbolically as a signifier of collective identity, a foundational myth of (victorious) social and environmental struggle, and instrumentally, as a model for collective action which is revived and replayed in new campaigns. The creation of an activist memory does not therefore simply concern the emotional or psychological responses or effects of individual participation in struggle, but the constitution of a rooted activist ‘savoir faire’ or ‘savoir agir’, by turns cultural, pedagogical, rhetorical, and tactical. To borrow the terms set out by Schurman and Munro, this collective memory becomes part of the ‘lifeworld’ of activists – which they define as ‘a stock of culturally transmitted background knowledge that people bring to a situation and that provides them with a common cognitive and normative frame of reference [and which comes] into being through a process of ongoing activity and social interaction among groups of people’ (2010, p.xvii) – which generates particular ways of interpreting the world, of analysing social problems, and of engaging in action.

With this in mind, it is striking that the Notre Dame campaign has developed dominant representations in both activist and media discourses through reference to the two foundational struggles of the French environmental movement: Plogoff, and Larzac. Simon recounts how, in February 2008, opponents to Notre Dame des Landes specifically mobilised actors from the Larzac and Plogoff struggles, activating the memory of these long-running campaigns – characterised by the determination and tenacity of activists and the state of conflict – as a ‘weapon of symbolic dissuasion’ (Simon 2010). Larzac, indeed, is a constant refrain in the construction of the current opposition to Notre Dame des Landes. For Jean RENARD, appearing as an expert witness in the April 2009 trial of the two activists in Saint Nazaire, ‘Ce projet est le Larzac de la Loire-Atlantique qu’on essaye de démanteler’.<sup>21</sup> Bové, speaking at the July 2011 anti-airport rally as a representative of the Larzac struggle, reminded the meeting of the activists from Notre Dame des Landes who came to support the Larzac farmers in 1973, and quoted Bernard Lambert’s declaration that ‘Jamais plus les paysans ne seront des Versaillais. Jamais plus les paysans ne s’opposeront à ceux qui veulent changer la société.’ For Bové, at Notre Dame des Landes,

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<sup>21</sup> Trial notes, Saint Nazaire, 28 April 2009; used courtesy of Catherine Edé, treasurer of the ACIPA, with thanks.

Aujourd'hui, en n'acceptant pas que l'on décide à votre place, en refusant le bétonnage au seul profit de la multinationale Vinci, c'est vous qui reprenez le flambeau.<sup>22</sup>

## VI. Discussion

What does this mean for the contours of the opposition to Notre Dame des Landes, and more generally, for the mobilising potential of climate change, as seen from below? The effect of these twin institutional and identitarian movement dynamics on the Notre Dame des Landes campaign appears to be two fold. First, in communicational terms, it has contained the campaigns within the region: they are, clearly, not perceived as national issues but rather local ones, despite their evident collective consequences. Opposition to the project has, so far, primarily addressed the local democratic and spatial issues that they raise within the bounds of municipal and regional politics and economic development strategies, rather than within the bounds of national (or beyond, European) politics. Both Stewart and Bové, speaking at the 2011 three-day meeting against the airport, urged protesters to forge alliances beyond the locality and take their case to national and European levels: for Bové,

Vous avez fait le tour de Nantes. Vous avez fait le tour de la Bretagne. L'heure est venue d'aller à Paris. C'est à Paris qu'il faut arracher la décision ! Il s'est passé quelque chose. Le visage de cette lutte est en train de changer ... Il faut que la lutte de Notre Dame des Landes devienne une lutte nationale. Ce combat est un combat paysan ! Ce combat est un combat de société !

The second dynamic here is that, within a movement tradition defined above all by reference to the Larzac and Plogoff founding struggles of the 1970s, Notre Dame des Landes is more easily cast as a struggle for specific territorial defence, and, to borrow the terms used by Bové, as a *combat paysan* rather than a *combat environnementale*. To an extent, this suturing of Notre Dame des Landes into a movement memorial narrative operates in contra-distinction to the institutional changes which have changed the territorial aspect of the Notre Dame des Landes mobilisation from a socio-cultural opposition to centralisation (as at Larzac and Plogoff) to a socio-economic opposition to local neo-liberal development and urbanisation strategies. For the contrasting networks of professionalised leftist agricultural organisations, residents associations, environmentalist and citizens organisations, and anarchist squat networks which have developed an often uneasy alliance, the activation of movement memory enables both the negotiation of a historical legitimising narrative of struggle and a series of common mobilising frames. There is thus a strong emphasis not on environmental problematics but on

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<sup>22</sup> Bové, speech, annual meeting against Notre Dame des Landes, 10 July 2011.



opposition to neo-liberal development, and on the defence of local peasant agriculture. In other words, though climate change is the defining environmental problematic of our age, this does not necessarily mean that it will form a central mobilising frame for federating social actors around a 'climate' project; rather, climate issues are cast within questions of social and political identity, an activist culture which overdetermines the importance of historic and foundational struggles in the development of new struggles, and which places the physical and symbolic construction of territory at the heart of environmental politics.

More widely, we should ask what this means for the relationship between climate change and environmental mobilisation. The evidence from the Notre Dame des Landes conflict fits into a wider picture of underplaying the climate problematic in favour of more tangible, localised issues: for example, not once has climate change been evoked on the web page of Europe Ecologie - Les Verts Bretagne in 2011, with rather algae, GMOs, organic farming, and fair access to housing featured instead. In Brittany, at least, global warming appears to be a global cause, with few localised impacts.

The climate problematic is of course an international one, dominated by international scientific and institutional organisations (UNEP, UNFCCC, IPCC, WMO, and so on). For many analysts, climate is correspondingly locked into an international framework which is remote from the daily pre-occupations of citizens. Comby (2008) characterises the local translation of climate preoccupations as a « descente en proximité », or grounding process, where activists, journalists and state administrative officials act as relays for the GHG problematic, seeking to make the urgency of the situation concrete and applicable to the lives of citizens. However, studies on risk perception by Boy (2007) show that directly perceived risk is more likely to produce behavioural change than indirectly perceived risk, whose effects are diffuse and distant. Climate change is more likely to be perceived as the latter type of risk than the former; for Boy,

Alors que certaines questions comme la sécurité routière ou l'alcoolisme sont familières, les changements climatiques constituent un problème objectivement lointain, abstrait et désincarné de toute expérience pratique. (Boy 2007, p.26)

We are thus within a double problematic, as Comby highlights. Global warming as a policy problem was developed within international arenas and institutions, and communicated by scientists as much as by environmental organisations. It thus appears distant from local agendas and public opinion, which only encounters the problematic at moments of international treaty negotiation (2008, p.44). The climate is correspondingly treated as a depoliticised and technical problem, restricted to moments of the signature (or not) of international agreements, and where international NGOs 'represent' civil society. The net

effect is to produce a disembodied discourse of emergency, clouded by positional conflicts over statistical legitimacy.

Of course, this does not account for the specific contours of environmental mobilisation in France. The institutionalisation of the environmental movement in France has produced a cadre of activists who, on account of their expertise, are engaged in the development and application of public policy aiming to mitigate the effects of climate change. Already depoliticised by a media culture which relegates climate change discussions to the promotion of 'petits gestes verts' and thus out of the mainstream of political debate, climate change is further depoliticised by the operation of the state environmental agency ADEME, which constructs climate change as one of individual responsibility and the application of remedial measures. However, it is perhaps in the structure of environmental organisations themselves that the key reasons for the weak diffusion of climate change problematic at the local level lie: the most significant networks are structured around highly media friendly personalities such as Nicolas Hulot, Yann Artus Bertrand, Jean Louis Etienne and Nicolas Vannier, whose consensual (and often industry friendly) visions of environmentalism are more clearly oriented towards the creation of a media event rather than societal analysis.

In Brittany, Greenpeace is the key actor in climate change problems, but the organisation has great difficulty in fostering links with highly implanted and longstanding activist networks. In contrast, the Cohérence network, which groups together the majority of associations in the French west, has a strong influence within institutional forums and local public policy enactment, but few connections to international environmental politics. In Brittany, perhaps the central contemporary question is water quality: the majority of mobilisations over the last twenty years are related to this question, which affects the lives of the regions inhabitants directly because of the extent of pollution and the costs of remediation measures. At Notre Dame de la Lande, the discourse of *la terre*, the soil, appears as central therefore because activists networks are more easily able to mobilise around issues which touch access to land and territory. In a context of the disappearance of agricultural land under the pressures of urbanisation, it is logical that land should be central to the process of moral shock and that universal thematics, such as climate change, should be relegated to the depoliticised international arenas or daily gestures.

Finally, we may ask: where does the decision to press ahead with Notre Dame des Landes leave the transport dispositions of the Grenelle de l'environnement? President Sarkozy, in his speech concluding the Grenelle, announced that

Il faut avoir le courage de reconnaître que nous ne pouvons plus définir des politiques en ignorant le défi climatique, en ignorant que nous détruisons les conditions de notre survie... tous les grands projets publics, toutes les décisions publiques seront arbitrées en intégrant leur coût pour le climat, leur « coût en carbone ». Toutes les décisions publiques seront arbitrées en intégrant leur coût pour la biodiversité. Très clairement, un projet dont le coût environnemental est trop lourd sera refusé... nous allons renverser la charge de la preuve. Ce ne sera plus aux solutions écologiques de prouver leur intérêt. Ce sera aux projets non écologiques de prouver qu'il n'était pas possible de faire autrement. Les décisions « non écologiques » devront être motivées et justifiées comme « dernier recours ». Nous allons appliquer immédiatement ce principe à la politique des transports. Le Grenelle propose une rupture.<sup>23</sup>

One key principle was that new airport construction should be frozen. However, from the start, there was also considerable ambiguity in this declaration, enabling the environmental considerations privileged by the Grenelle to be restricted to exceptional circumstances. The 'Grenelle 2' law, which passed into effect on 12 July 2010, sets out the Grenelle's commitments sector by sector, project by project; mysteriously, there are now no commitments concerning airport construction.

One does not need to doubt the sincerity of Vinci's CSR, or that of the commitment to sustainable development of the Nantes metropolitan council, to see that Notre Dame des Landes symbolises the retreat of the government's vision in the Grenelle, nor the highly relative character of the environmental advances it offers. If there is a clear commitment within the aviation industry to improve its environmental performance through technological development and more responsive infrastructural decision-making, remodelling transport provision away from air towards less polluting forms (such as highspeed rail) or controlling air traffic growth remain firmly off the agenda at both industrial and political level. In this specific context, Notre Dame des Landes is entirely consistent with the environmental constraints imposed by the Grenelle.

Though the Grenelle was widely seen as a disappointment by environmental activists, Notre Dame des Landes nevertheless symbolises the retreat of president Sarkozy's government from an effective environmental agenda, and specifically following the Copenhagen summit, from the climate agenda. The government's climate policy consequently also risks causing social grievances, as the pressure on individual car users appears to contrast with the protection afforded to industrial (and particularly

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<sup>23</sup> Discours de M. le Président de la République à l'occasion de la restitution des conclusions du Grenelle de l'environnement, Palais de l'Elysée, 25 October 2007, see [http://www.dgcl.interieur.gouv.fr/sections/a\\_votre\\_service/discours/interventions/downloadFile/attachedFile/Prgrenelleenvironnement251007.pdf?nocache=1208156012.55](http://www.dgcl.interieur.gouv.fr/sections/a_votre_service/discours/interventions/downloadFile/attachedFile/Prgrenelleenvironnement251007.pdf?nocache=1208156012.55)

aeronautic) concerns. In general, political will on climate change appears to be weak, and prey to the pressures of the social and economic contexts at both state and regional levels.

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